

Teacher Legislation **Announcement**

Recruit Teachers. Retain Teachers. Respect Teachers.

February 19, 2004
Governor's Office, New Capitol

Education Starts with Teachers

As I said in my "State of the State" address, everything in education starts with a teacher. A quality teacher is the first essential ingredient to quality education. Because of this, I am proud to be joined by members of the House and Senate who will be filing legislation today that helps Mississippi recruit teachers, retain teachers and respect teachers.

I want to address Mississippi's teachers at every stage of their career. At the very beginning of a potential career, I want new incentives to recruit teachers into the field who would otherwise not choose the profession. At what should be the peak of their careers, I want new incentives to keep some of our most experienced teachers in our schools who are currently pushed toward retirement by negative financial incentives. And in the middle of their career, I want to make sure that all of our teachers are given proper respect and are not used as pawns in budget battles.

Recruit Teachers

Current teacher scholarship programs require future teachers to be education majors. But our state schools of education are producing fewer than 1500 teachers – 600 of whom leave the state or the profession within a year. We should make our programs more appealing to students if they are willing to stay and teach here; and we should allow these future teachers to major in subjects other than education.

If we are trying to attract a future chemistry teacher to the Delta, we should give incentives to teach to students who major in chemistry. In the process, we will attract new people who will decide to stay permanently in Mississippi education. The legislation we announce today, sponsored by Sen. Mike Chaney and Representative Wanda Jennings, will make more potential teachers eligible for state teaching incentives.

We're pleased today to also be joined by Daphne Buckley and Wesley Williams who work on alternative certification issues at the Department of Education. We are also happy to be joined by Wes Slay and Les Heggwood who are two alternatively certified teachers at Raymond High School.

Retain Teachers

Our retirement rules give financial incentives to our most experienced teachers to retire and quit teaching in our public schools. These teachers are

usually about 50 years old and are at the peak of their careers.

Then they retire, but many don't quit teaching; they just quit teaching in our public schools.

There are some 6300 teachers with 25 or more years of service in Mississippi's schools. Most would love to continue to teach where they are now, and many will, despite the financial incentive to retire.

We need to revise the system to eliminate the negative incentive, because we need very much to keep these teachers.

We should not let pension policy drive education policy. The good news is we can change the teacher retirement rules with no adverse effect on PERS, our state employees retirement plan or on any current or retired state employee or teacher. Having no negative impact on the retirement system is an essential element of this plan.

I want to recognize Senator Videt Carmichael of Meridian and again Representative Wanda Jennings for authoring this crucial teacher retention legislation.

Respect Teachers

In addition, I want to welcome Senator Charlie Ross who is introducing a bill that stands up for teachers. As I said yesterday in a letter to all the legislators, I'm opposed to the idea that cutting teachers is the

way for school districts to meet the Legislative Budget recommendation. That is the wrong approach, and Senator Ross' bill would put teeth in that idea.

I know everyone hopes we can find more revenue for K-12 education than the Legislative Budget Recommendation. I said so at the time I accepted their unanimous recommendation for my budget proposal.

Savings from “Operation: Streamline” will make it more likely additional funding can be added to public schools. Hopefully recent economic growth will result in more revenue than projected. Everyone hopes so. But the point is: getting rid of teachers should not be the first knee jerk reaction to saving money in education.